

House Committee on Veterans' Affairs

MEMORIAL DAY UPDATE 2009

NOTE FROM CHAIRMAN BOB FILNER

In this time of war, our grateful nation honors the mothers, fathers, sons, daughters, friends, and neighbors of those who have made the ultimate sacrifice. This Memorial Day will take on a more profound and personal significance for many American families this year—those who are mourning the loss of one of their own and those who have loved ones far from home. I can only hope that you may find consolation in the thanks that this country has to offer.

I ask that Americans everywhere take the time today to honor the fallen; say “thank you” to someone in uniform; visit a local veterans’ memorial; visit Arlington National Cemetery to remember how much was given in order that we can live this day, and every day, in freedom. Let it be known that none of our nation’s warriors have ever died in vain, and let it be known that none of America’s heroes will ever be forgotten. This Memorial Day, I encourage you to honor those who make us the home of the brave in the land of the free.

But also remember, as we honor our nation’s heroes on this Memorial Day, singular utterances of the adage “supporting our troops” is not enough. If I may borrow a phrase from former presidential candidate Adlai E. Stevenson, “Patriotism is not short outbursts of emotion, but the tranquil and steady dedication of a lifetime.” The House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs works hard every day to ensure that the contributions of our brave veterans are never forgotten. It is the solemn duty of this Committee—and all Americans alike—to properly honor and take care of those who have fought to preserve the essential freedom and liberty that we value so dearly.

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Preview of Committee Action

Advanced Appropriations

House and Senate Veterans' Affairs Committees continue to work with appropriators to approve the VA health care budget one year in advance. This change, known as "advance appropriations," would supply timely and predictable funding to ensure the highest quality of health care for veterans.



Electronic Medical Records

President Obama ordered the Department of Defense and the VA to work together to define and build a Joint Virtual Lifetime Electronic record that will ultimately contain administrative and medical information from the day an individual enters military service throughout their military career, and into the veteran phase of life. This information sharing is a matter of life and death for our veterans and the Committee is eager to ensure this "talk" is partnered with ACTION.

Women Veterans

Stephanie Herseth Sandlin, Chairwoman of the Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity, reintroduced the "Women Veterans Health Care Improvement Act," a bill to expand and improve VA health care services for the 1.8 million women who have bravely served their country. Mike Michaud, Chairman of the Health Subcommittee, understands the importance of addressing the health care needs of female service members, many of whom are serving in combat situations, and plans to consider the bill during future Subcommittee hearings. H.R. 1211 will ensure VA has the authority and flexibility to provide health care services to women veterans.



Address the Claims Backlog

John Hall, Chairman of the Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs, has held a series of hearings on the disability claims backlog and burdensome appellate process. Findings from the hearings and witness testimony will provide the foundation for comprehensive legislation to further tackle the claims backlog that stymies our wounded veterans from receiving the benefits they earned and deserve.

Strengthen VA Research

GAO issued a report offering recommendations to improve the nonprofit research and education corporations (NPC) that partner with the VA to conduct research and education at VA medical centers. Chairman Filner plans to introduce legislation to help NPCs meet their full potential in supporting VA research and education, which in turn results in improved treatments and high quality care for our nation's veterans.



Oversight of Endoscopy Issue

Harry Mitchell, Chairman of the Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, continues to address recent reports that veterans were possibly exposed to contaminated endoscopy equipment while undergoing routine colonoscopies and other procedures. The VA's Inspector General is currently conducting a complete and thorough investigation and the Committee plans to hold an oversight hearing to properly review how veterans have been affected.

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New Laws

The Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act (Public Law 111-13)

Signed into law April 21, 2009

The Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act encourages a renewed spirit of national service and community volunteerism by establishing a Veterans Corp program designed to help veterans meet the needs of their fellow service members.

On President Obama's Desk

S. 896 – Helping Families Save Their Homes Act

Sent to President Obama May 20, 2009

This legislation builds on the President's housing initiative, to provide significant incentives to lenders, servicers, and veteran homeowners to work together to modify loans and to avoid foreclosures.

Important Veterans' Legislation Passed by the House of Representatives

H.R. 23, as amended – Belated Thank You to the Merchant Mariners of World War II Act of 2009

This bill establishes the Merchant Mariner Equity Compensation Fund for payments of a monthly benefit of \$1,000 to each individual who, between December 7, 1941, and December 31, 1946, was a documented member of the U.S. Merchant Marine.

H.R. 1088 – Mandatory Veteran Specialist Training Act of 2009

This bill improves training requirements for Disabled Veterans' Outreach Program specialists and Local Veterans' Employment Representatives.

H.R. 1089, as amended – Veterans Employment Rights Realignment Act of 2009

H.R. 1089 allows the U.S. Office of Special Counsel to receive and investigate certain USERRA claims containing a related prohibited personnel practice allegation.

H.R. 1170, as amended – Grant Program for Specially Adapted Housing

This bill directs the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to make grants to encourage the development of new assistive technologies for specially adapted housing for disabled veterans. Grant amounts would be limited to \$200,000 annually per recipient.

H.R. 1171 – Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program Reauthorization Act of 2009

H.R. 1171 is an important step to ensuring that the VA is prepared to provide comprehensive services to prevent veteran homelessness. This bill reauthorizes the Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program through 2014 and includes an additional \$10 million to provide dedicated services for homeless women veterans and homeless veterans with children. Grants are available to provide job training, counseling, placement services, and child care services to expedite the reintegration of veterans into the labor force.

H.R. 1377 – Emergency Care Eligibility Expansion

H.R. 1377 is a common sense bill that clarifies the reimbursement responsibilities of the VA so that veterans can focus on their recovery, instead of being overburdened with financial concerns.

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Veterans Funding

FY 2010 Budget Resolution

- ◆ The Fiscal Year 2010 Budget Resolution (S.Con.Res. 13) was approved on April 29, 2009, and provides for a \$5.6 billion increase over fiscal year 2009, an increase of 11.7% for veterans health care and other programs. This budget increase builds upon the success of the 110th Congress when Democrats added \$16.3 billion to the VA budget.

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (P.L. 111-5)

- ◆ Congressional approval of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act is the first major step in rebuilding our country's economy, while also honoring our veterans.
- ◆ The bill provides a \$1.4 billion increase for the Department of Veterans Affairs for maintenance at VA medical facilities, construction of veterans' extended care facilities, and veteran cemetery repairs. The bill also provides economic stimulus payments of \$250 to disabled veterans receiving VA compensation or pension to be dispersed in June of 2009.

VA Oversight: Solutions for Veterans & Accountability for Americans

The House Committee on Veterans' Affairs conducted rigorous oversight of various VA operations to improve services for veterans, as well as provide accountability for the American taxpayer. The Committee has held a series of oversight hearings to measure program results, end waste, and combat mismanagement.

- ◆ The Committee continues to monitor VA's planning and progress in implementing the new G.I. Bill requirements which are expected to go into effect on August 1, 2009.
- ◆ The Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations held a hearing on Gulf War Illness research. Many of the 700,000 Gulf War veterans are looking for answers about proper medical treatment and benefits that they bravely earned, as they continue to face ongoing challenges as a result of their service in Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm.
- ◆ The Committee held a Roundtable to address the needs of America's 1.8 million women veterans. Participants discussed a number of issues that solely affect women or impact female veterans differently than male veterans.